

## Integration of Popular Music in Educational Projects in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** In order to adequately prepare music education students for their future careers, it is important to include content related to popular music in the curricula, in addition to courses that focus on developing knowledge and skills in classical music. Despite the widespread recognition of its importance, educational knowledge of popular music is a relatively new or even unknown source in teaching music at conservatoires. In Croatia, for example, music teachers who start their careers in schools do not acquire sufficient academic knowledge or professional practice related to popular music during their studies. The music education system has marginalized this genre and there are no separate courses on this topic in the curricula of music education programs. Consequently, content related to popular music is usually integrated into the curriculum through teaching projects. This article presents the implementation, aims and outcomes of three such projects carried out at the Department of Music Pedagogy at the Academy of Music in Pula. The projects are: Film Music Adventure, which considers well-known soundtracks from films, Superstar, which is dedicated to exploring the intersection of rock and opera, and a locally oriented project reviewing musical life in the largest city in the Istrian region, entitled The Seventies Measured by the Metronome: Everyday Musical Life in Pula 1970–1980. Working on these projects engaged students in a dynamic and interactive learning process and increased their engagement, motivation and interest, as well as their knowledge of popular music.

**Keywords:** conservatory (music academy), Croatia, popular music, project-based learning.

## Introduction

Popular music is of great importance in today's society as it reflects cultural, social and technological changes and connects people of all ages and backgrounds by creating common points of communication and understanding. With the ubiquity of modern media and digital platforms, popular music now reaches every corner of the world, shaping identities, trends and attitudes. Despite its undeniable presence and influence, it remains underrepresented in the music education and academic settings.

An examination of the curricula of music education at conservatories in Croatia shows a disappointing picture when it comes to the inclusion of popular music. At all Croatian conservatories/universities, the content related to popular music in the music study programs for the education of future music teachers is minimal and sporadic (Marin, 2022). Consequently, prospective music teachers lack sufficient academic knowledge and practical experience in this field. The Croatian academic community continues to adhere to a value-based hierarchy of genres and marginalizes popular music. In formal music education, Western classical music is favored and preferred, which affects students' perception that this is the only *right* or *worthy* music that should be taught.

The introduction of popular music into conservatoire curricula offers numerous benefits for students and institutions alike. It broadens their perspectives and enhances their creativity by encouraging them to explore different genres and forms. As popular music often reflects social movements and global trends, its integration into the classroom helps students to better understand cultural, societal and tech-

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nological changes. In addition, it helps develop critical thinking skills, analytical thinking, teamwork and digital literacy, which are essential in today's rapidly evolving music and media industries. By listening to, experiencing and engaging with popular music, students become familiar with its characteristics, acquire different musical knowledge, learn about the characteristics of different eras, discuss the quality of musical pieces and evaluate them critically. Ultimately, the integration of popular music into the curriculum makes it more attractive and creates a more inclusive and modern educational environment. Because of its familiarity and relevance to students, it encourages active participation, critical thinking and creativity. Cross-curricular approaches, content integration and interdisciplinarity should be considered when teaching popular music.

Years of experience in working with students of the Department of Music Pedagogy at the Academy of Music in Pula, especially through teaching projects (Duraković and Vidulin, 2017, 2020), shows that these projects equip students with a range of professional skills (e.g. music analysis, musicological knowledge, application of various didactic strategies) and extracurricular competences (e.g. IT skills, digital literacy, research methods and public presentation skills). This contributes significantly to their professional and personal development.

In order to improve the models of teaching practice, some of these projects were thematically linked to popular music. As there is no universal methodology for the implementation of project-based teaching, this article describes three projects, outlines their implementation phases, presents the results, explores possibilities for dissemination and discusses the learning outcomes and the types of contexts (intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary and cross-curricular).

## Popular Music: Approach and Perspective

Popular music is the subject of extensive research and discussion in musicology, media studies, sociology, cultural studies and other disciplines. Leading theoretical contributions provide insights into its historical development, cultural context and social functions, encompassing production, distribution and consumption, as well as its role in shaping identities, communities and cultural values (Frith, 1996). Its meaning is also explored through the emotional and subjective connections that listeners develop with music (Grossberg, 1997), through analysis of its structures and meanings (Middleton, 2000), and through the impact of technology on its socio-cultural implications, including issues of politics and power (Hesmondhalgh, 2002).

Birrer (1985) categorizes definitions of popular music into four perspectives, which can function independently or in combination. The normative perspective associates popular music with quality judgments and often describes it as less sophisticated than classical music. The descriptive or distinctive perspective identifies characteristics of popular music without value judgments. The sociological perspective examines its social context and functions, including its role in the formation of values, norms and identities. Finally, the technological perspective focuses on the modes of production and distribution and the impact of technology on popular music. While these definitions are helpful in understanding the complexity of this cultural phenomenon, a multidisciplinary approach provides a more comprehensive view of what popular music is and how it functions in different contexts (Middleton, 1990).

These varying perspectives are reflected in the theoretical frameworks for teaching popular music at higher education institutions. Researchers emphasize the importance of a cross-curricular approach to provide a holistic music education that is responsive to students' needs and interests (Campbell 2004, Jorgensen 2003, Regelski and Gates, 2010). Suggested strategies include constructivist methods that encourage active student participation through the creation and performance of music, as well as critical pedagogy that focuses on the theoretical and critical analysis of the sociocultural and political dimensions of music (Elliott and Silverman 2015, Powell and Smith 2024, Wright, 2010).

The integration of technological skills is also crucial, as it enables students to effectively utilize online resources and platforms while connecting popular music to other disciplines such as media studies, sociology, anthropology, and technology. Curricula that incorporate these elements provide students with a comprehensive education that helps them understand various musical practices in the context of a broader social, cultural, and technological environment (Campbell 2004, Jorgensen 2003). Collaborative learning and project-based teaching are increasingly emphasized in contemporary music education, encouraging innovative solutions and deeper engagement with popular music (Goodrich 2022, Przybylski and Niknafs 2015, Sawyer, 2007).

## Project-Based Learning: A Model for Improving Teaching

Contemporary education systems often cling to outdated teaching methods, creating a gap between current practices and the demands of contemporary higher education. Rapid societal change requires methodological adaptability and the integration of innovative approaches that motivate students and modernize the educational process (Velasco Moreno, 2023). Project-based learning, which focuses on interdisciplinary projects, offers a valuable model for improving teaching methods.

In project-based learning, students acquire skills in research, scientific methodology and public presentation through interdisciplinary and multimodal approaches. This method engages students in dynamic, interactive learning processes and increases their engagement and motivation. It promotes active learning, creativity, teamwork and skills such as planning, analysis, evaluation, decision-making, time management and presentation. These competencies prepare students for challenges outside the academic environment and prove valuable for their future education and career.

By developing critical thinking, social competence, and practical application of knowledge, students acquire both academic and life skills that are essential for meeting the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Johnson and Johnson 1999, Saavedra and Opfer, 2012). Teachers play a key role in setting goals, encouraging project work and guiding students to practical, impactful results (Meyer, 2002, Meyer, 2002). The sense of accomplishment when a project is completed can be a powerful motivator for further learning.

Recent research provides insights into different approaches to project-based learning and contributes to the understanding and application of modern educational trends (Bell 2010, Boss and Krauss 2022, Thomas 2006, Wurdinger, 2016). Studies also provide examples of teaching projects and strategies for their implementation in conservatoires and offer guidelines for future practice (Hernández and Vicente 2022, Przybylski and Niknafs 2015; Tobias, Campbell and Greco, 2015).

This article follows these trends and presents three popular music projects developed at the Department of Music Pedagogy at the Academy of Music in Pula. These projects are an example of a model for improving teaching methods and promoting innovative approaches to integrating popular music into higher education curricula.

## Popular Music at the Academy of Music in Pula: Examples of Project-Based Learning

### *Project 1. Film Music Adventure*

#### **Project description**

The educational project entitled *Film Music Adventure*, which dealt with music from famous films, was conducted by four students. The students conceptualized the theme independently and chose the music on which the project was based: James Bond and Skyfall songs from the James Bond films, the Pink Panther theme from the film of the same name, the love duet from Beauty and the Beast, the theme of Darth Vader from Star Wars, the theme from Desperado and the theme from Schindler's List.

#### **Work phases**

The first phase involved obtaining the sheet music for the selected musical examples. The students divided up the tasks among themselves and decided who should analyze and perform the individual pieces. If they felt that a piece needed to be rearranged or adapted for a particular instrument or additional background vocals, they involved colleagues who they felt had the necessary skills: few colleagues from the Department of Music Pedagogy, several solo singers and others who played exclusively acting roles.

In the second phase, they researched information about the content, directors and music composers of the selected films, created a historical overview of each film and conducted a brief analysis of each song. At the same time, they rehearsed their performances of the pieces.

In the third phase, after the music pieces were rehearsed and analyzed, they developed a script for

the public presentation and created a schedule for the event. They decided that the presentation should be aimed at a wide audience (primary school pupils, high school students, university students and the general public). To make the presentation more engaging and dynamic, they organized a small ensemble of Academy students playing various instruments (tuba, trombone, violin, flute, accordion) to perform the well-known 20th Century Fox theme recording their performance. They also filmed a glamorous walk down a red carpet and edited the footage with camera flashes and audience applause to create the atmosphere of an Academy Awards ceremony.

They borrowed costumes for roles such as Beauty and the Beast, Darth Vader, Pink Panther and the Detective to enhance their performances. They also made sure that a red carpet was laid out on part of the stage where the project was presented. The mentors helped adapt the script and concept for the public presentation, supervised the rehearsals for the performance and oversaw the harmonic and formal analysis of the music pieces.

### **Presentation of the project and dissemination**

The project was presented in 2019 on the Small Stage of the Istrian National Theater in Pula. The event began with the projection of two video clips on the screen of the theater hall: the theme of 20th Century Fox and a scene of a walk on the red carpet. The students, working in pairs, took the stage one by one to present their descriptions and analysis of selected songs. At the same time, the movie trailers matching the songs were shown on the screen. Each analysis was followed by a live performance of the song.

The appeal and dynamism of the program was enhanced by the inclusion of acting elements: during the performance of the Star Wars theme, a student portraying Darth Vader wielded a lightsaber; during the performance of The Pink Panther theme, a detective humorously attempted to outwit the elusive pink panther, which he eventually succeeded in doing.

The program ended with an Oscar award ceremony where the students presented symbolic *golden statues* to project mentors, professors and fellow students who had contributed to the realization of the project. The 60-minute program received extensive coverage in the local media, further increasing the impact and awareness of the project.

### **Correlation, knowledge acquisition, skills development and outcomes**

In this project, students acquired skills through cross-curricular and interdisciplinary connections. In their work, they used various knowledge they had acquired during their training and correlated music theory disciplines and music history content with music interpretation. They also used knowledge that they had previously acquired through formal and non-formal education and informal learning.

**Table 1.** Musical competencies of the students – project 1

Courses	Methods	Outcomes
History of Music Knowledge of music literature	historical biographical comparative	analysis and synthesis of musicological knowledge
Harmony Musical Forms and Styles	harmonic and structural analysis of selected songs analysis of musical elements (melody, mood, rhythm, dynamics, agogics, etc.)	analysis and synthesis of theoretical musical knowledge
Piano Solo Singing Guitar	demonstration (performance of selected songs, either solo or in ensembles)	comparison and evaluation of performances
Harmony on Piano Playing Scores Arranging for Ensembles	musical arrangement	creating orchestral arrangements adapting songs for voice and piano, voice, guitar and piano, piano and flute

Presentation and acting aspects	Writing scripts	Use of multimedia tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• development of public speaking and presentation skills</li><li>• competencies acquired through previous formal and non-formal education and informal learning</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• acquisition of writing skills</li><li>• competencies acquired through previous formal and non-formal education and informal learning</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• mastering tools for recording and editing video content</li><li>• competencies acquired through previous formal and non-formal education and informal learning</li></ul>

Figure 1. Non-musical skills of the students

## Project 2. *Superstar*

### Project description

Six students took part in the *Superstar* project. Preparations began shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a somewhat modest realization of the project. It consisted of two parts: a short film in which the students used instrumental excerpts from the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a soundtrack, and a live performance of the song *Superstar* from the same musical work.

### Work phases

In the first preparatory phase, students developed a theme and wrote a script in which all students receive the same mysterious text message consisting of only two words: rock and opera, stating that they need to meet urgently due to a serious situation. At the end of the conspiratorial meeting, during which they discuss the necessary action of merging the incompatible – rock and opera, they decide to rehearse a performance of a song from the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. They create a choreography, design costumes, warm up their voices and arrive at the place where they will perform the songs live.

In the second phase, the students rehearsed the performance of the songs and learned how to act out the prepared script. They then filmed scenes with their cell phones in their student apartments and on the streets of the city, recording sounds and edited the video with the mobile application InShot. The humorous and educational video, aimed at compulsory school students, taught viewers the differences between rock and opera, the elements of opera and the differences between opera and rock opera. As the terms rock and opera may seem contradictory at first glance, the film and performance emphasized this contradiction. The video also included educational subtitles defining musical terms. The mentor's role in this project was limited to reading and correcting parts of the script, while the students performed the performance part independently without the mentor's supervision.

### Presentation of the project and dissemination

The project was presented at the Eighth Forum of Music Pedagogy Students in 2022. The video was shown first, followed by a live performance in which Judas, Jesus and two groups of singers performed the song. The presentation was internal and intended for students at the Academy of Music in Pula. The recording was uploaded to the Academy of Music YouTube channel.

Interdisciplinarity, knowledge acquisition, skills development and outcomes:

As with the previous project, the students acquired skills through cross-curricular and interdisciplinary connections. During the project, they applied various knowledge they had acquired during their education by linking music theory disciplines, didactical content and music history to the interpretation of the music pieces. They also used knowledge they had previously acquired through formal and informal education and informal learning\*.

\*The results of non-formal education and informal learning (presentation and acting, script writing and use of multimedia tools) are consistent with the results presented in Figure 1.

**Table 2.** Musical competencies of the students – project 2

Courses	Methods	Outcomes
Didactics of Music Education Knowledge of music literature	historical comparative	analyzing and synthesizing musicological and music didactical knowledge
Vocal Technique	demonstration (performance of selected songs)	comparing and evaluating performances

*Project 3. Popular Music in the Project The Seventies Measured by the Metronome:  
Pula's Musical Everyday Life, 1970–1980*

### Project description

This research project was carried out by a group of students. The topic was chosen by the mentor, who noted that there was no published research results on any aspect of musical life in the 1970s and saw this research as pioneering work that was valuable for educating a wider audience and future researchers.

As the project was entirely focused on music history, the mentor gave the students a lecture on the concept of historical musicology, which studies musical phenomena as part of historical and evolutionary processes. The lecture introduced various sources for the study of contemporary history: material, written (e.g. newspapers and periodicals from the past), archival documentation, oral, visual and audiovisual sources (drawings, photographs, maps, illustrations, posters, audio and video recordings) and others.

In the discussion, the students reached a consensus on which sources could be used for this particular project. It was also agreed that the results of the project should be presented in the form of a documentary film. In order to realize this, the research questions focused on determining the target audience and content: Who should the film be aimed at (specialist audience, scientific community or general public) and what should its aims be (educational, informative or evoking memories of the past).

### Work phases

The first phase of the research involved collecting newspaper articles. The students had the task of viewing and photographing all music-related articles from the daily newspapers in the university library. For each photo, they had to note the author, the title of the article, the date and the page number.

In the second phase, the students sorted the collected articles into thematic categories: music education, classical music concerts, activities of cultural and artistic associations, opera seasons that take place in the amphitheater during the summer, the work of orchestras and composers, popular music and curiosities.

In the third phase, the collected texts were edited and the script written. The students responsible for the popular music read all the relevant texts, summarized the most important and interesting information and reworked and reshaped the content to integrate it into the film. For visual enrichment, photos, audio and video materials from the 1970s were collected, provided by museums, libraries, radio and television stations, as well as some sources found on YouTube. The introduction was filmed in front of a once-popular discotheque that hosted numerous music events in the 1970s, while the rest of the script was recorded in a studio.

The popular music part of the movie was divided into three major segments: Pop Music, Folk and Newly Composed Folk Music, and Rock and Jazz. Each segment was about the activities of local artists from Pula as well as guest artists from other republics of the former Yugoslavia and abroad. Texts were written to inform future viewers about the popularity of the artists and their reception by the audience in Pula. The film also offered insights into the best-selling records of the time, the music played in dance halls and discotheques, the most popular hits, audience behavior at various events and much more.

## **Presentation of the project and dissemination**

The film was screened at the Tenth Forum of Music Pedagogy Students in 2024 and later broadcast in two episodes on TV Nova in Pula. The public presentation was reported in all local media.

## **Interdisciplinarity, skills development and outcomes**

In this project, students developed their skills through interdisciplinary connections by applying research methods commonly used in the humanities area. They also applied knowledge acquired through formal education, non-formal education and informal learning.

**Table 3. Courses, research sources, methods, and outcomes – project 3**

Courses	History of Music History of Croatian Music Knowledge of Music Literature
Research Sources	articles from newspapers and magazines photographs and posters kept in museums and libraries photographs from private albums video materials kept in the archives of institutions that were active in the 1970s archived radio and television broadcasts
Research Methods	inductive method of analysis and synthesis generalization classification descriptive compilation comparation historical
Outcomes	understand concepts in the context of media coverage research and interpret the content of articles in the context of social conditions analyze, extract, evaluate, compare and critically assess newspaper articles to determine their relevance for project implementation meaningfully combine selected articles into coherent units synthesize and structure texts present and interpret the texts develop public speaking and presentation skills

## **Conclusion**

Given the low proportion of popular music in higher music education programs in Croatia, it is unlikely that students, future teacher are adequately prepared to teach this subject effectively. But, the curricula for compulsory primary and secondary schools prescribe the teaching of content related to the practice of popular music. This means that future teachers will have to rely largely on self-taught knowledge in their work in the classroom unless there are significant changes in higher education programs.

In didactic courses and in school practice, when designing their own lessons, music education students often combine standard teaching units with examples from classical but also popular music. The great interest of students in theses on popular music also shows that many of them would like to study these genres in more depth.

An additional comprehensive curriculum with courses dealing with popular music would better prepare students for their future careers. In the meantime, efforts should be made to integrate popular music through project-based learning, which can greatly enhance their learning experience and increase the public visibility of the academies themselves.

## **Conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization: L.D. and S.V.; data curation: L.D. and S.V.; formal analyses: L.D.; methodology: L.D. and S.V.; writing - original draft preparation: L.D.; writing - review and editing: S.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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